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ABSTRACT

This paper is a report of two studies which were conducted on children's television. The first, "Saturday Children's Television," is a content analysis of programming and advertising matter on four Boston commercial TV stations. The second, "Romper Room, An Analysis," focuses on that program's commercial practices. The first study involved the video-taping of 18 3/4 hours of programming taken over four Saturdays. The analysis provides: (1) an overall description of program materials; (2) discussion of specific aspects of the programs (violence, laugh tracks, etc.); and (3) a statistical description and discussion of commercial messages. The "Romper Room" study was drawn from tapes of one week's programs, 45 minutes per day. The analysis centered around (1) the amount of program time spent in displaying brand name toys; (2) time devoted to other activities; (3) time devoted to commercial announcements; (4) extent to which hostess gave commercials herself; and (5) extent of advertising of Romper Room-Hasbro toys. This study revealed that 45 percent of the program for the week was devoted to commercial promotion of its own products. (Author/AJ)

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DESCRIPTION

OF

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ADVERTISING

(Statement before the Federal Trade Commission, Hearings on Modern Advertising Practices, November 10, 1971)

by

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There are two studies which I conducted in the last few months which I would like to summarize here. The first is entitled: "Saturday Children's Television," a content analysis of programming and advertising matter on four Boston commercial TV stations. The second is "Romper Room: An Analysis," in which the primary focus is on the commercial practices used in the program. Both of these studies were supported by funds from Action for Children's Television. I would also like to acknowledge the help provided by the School of Public Communication at Boston University in the form of equipment and research assistance. Helping me with the studies were two graduate students in communication research, Gloria Chapman and Carol Springer.

I will first try to summarize the findings of these studies and save any evaluative comments for later.

Saturday Children's TV

Briefly, this study involved video-taping four commercial TV stations' programming intended for the child audience. The taping extended over four Saturdays beginning May 29 and ending June 19, 1971--that is, one station per Saturday. This resulted in a total of 18 3/4 hours of programming on tape. This is not all of Boston's TV programming for children, of course. Rather, it is limited to commercial TV stations, and of five Boston commercial stations (3 VHF and 2 UHF), only four broadcast children's programs on Saturdays. The sample, therefore, represents programming from affiliates of the three major networks and one independent UHF station.

The purposes of the analysis were as follows:

1. To give an overall description, statistically, of the nature of the program material--that is, whether network, recorded, or local; the type of program (comedy, informational, etc.); what the programs were "about" (the subject matter); the kinds of characters; and the settings.

2. To ask specific questions about the programs--such as the extent, types and results of violence, whether or not laugh tracks were used, whether there were interruptions for commercial announcements, and so forth.

3. To statistically describe the number and amount of time devoted to commercial and non-commercial messages, including the type of products advertised, the kind of characters, settings, etc.

4. To ask specific questions about commercial announcements--whether designed for the child or general audience, whether there were "tie-in's" with the host or characters of the program giving the commercials, instances of product endorsements by celebrities, the use of "qualifiers" and special visual effects, and whether prices were given, premiums offered, etc.

To get a more complete picture of what was done, I refer you to the appendix to the report which gives the procedures and detailed categories used.

All time was broken down into program segments (stories, cartoons, or other complete units of programming) and announcements. Overall, 77% of the time was devoted to program content, the remainder being commercial product announcements, program promotion, non-commercial messages and station identification.

For program material, 68% was from the network, 19% recorded, and 13% live; 88% was classified as entertainment and 12% as informational; 66% used animating.

Network programs (which constituted more than two-thirds of all time) was 94% entertainment and recorded time 100% ent-

ertainment. By contrast, 68% of local-live time was informational programming. In actual time this was about one hour and a few minutes of informational total.

Program material was also classified as to subject-matter. Of approximately 10 1/2 hours of dramatic format programming (stories, cartoons), 32% was devoted to segments in which crime or its solution was the predominant subject-matter, another 16% involved interpersonal (usually physical) struggles between characters, and 16% to the supernatural (dealing with ghosts, magic, witchcraft). The remaining 36% was spread over eight other categories including the entertainment world, science and technology, nature and animals, armed forces and war, love and romance, government and public affairs, and historical topics. There were no stories about domestic (home and family) problems, religion, race or nationality, education, business and industry, or literature and the fine arts.

The informational programs centered on four categories: science and technology, race and nationality, literature and the fine arts, and nature and animals, with other miscellaneous topics comprising the balance.

This is the program matter which forms the context for commercial advertising.

Commercial messages accounted for approximately 11 minutes per hour on the average, with a high on one station of almost 15 minutes per hour and a low on another of 10 minutes per hour. These figures include both commercial product announcements and program promotional announcements. However, more than 8 of 10 commercial minutes were product announcements, and for one sta-

tion, 95% of commercial time was devoted to commercial product announcements.

Less than four percent of time was devoted to non-commercial announcements.

In number, 406 commercial messages were counted. More specifically, there were 57 companies advertising 99 products in 132 separately designed commercials, appearing 311 times. In addition, there were 95 program promos, for a total of 406 commercial messages. If one were to spread these out evenly over all time monitored, this would amount to one commercial message every 2.8 minutes. Of course, they are not spread evenly, but grouped in two's, three's and four's.

I was also interested in finding out the proportion of commercial to other announcements within programs and in identifiable station-break segments. This comparison revealed an interesting ratio. Although 66% of all announcements were commercial product announcements, only 32% of those between programs were, whereas 77% of announcements within (or interrupting) programs were commercial product announcements.

Six categories of commercial products were used, At this time of year, four were almost equally divided:

Toys	22%
Candies/sweets	20
Cereals	24
Other foods/snacks	22
Medicines/drugs/vitamins	1
Other products	11
Total (311 CA's)	100%

Product advertising is highly seasonal, however. For example, Dr. Ralph Jennings found in his study conducted in November 1969 (just before Christmas), that 57% of all commercials were for toys,

compered with the 22% we found.

Most frequently commercials were non-animated (58%), had an off-stage voice extolling the virtues of the product (40%), showed the product in use (62%), and displayed the product continuously (49%). This pattern varied greatly by product category, however. Toy commercials were 100% non-animated as compared with cereal and food/snack ads, of which two out of three were totally or partially animated.

This illustrates how toys and other products are sold. Toy commercials are "realistic" in that all are non-animated, and almost all show children playing with the toy continuously during the commercial, while an off-stage voice supplies the description. Cereal commercials, by contrast, are frequently animated, use a musical or dramatic skit format, and pictures or drawings of the product are displayed only briefly or intermittently. Frequently they also include a heavy emphasis on premium offers to help sell the cereal. I suppose one could label toy commercials as "hard sell" and cereals as more entertaing and "soft sell."

We also classified the physical "settings" of the commercials. Although difficult to draw conclusions, it may be noteworthy that only two percent used any kind of work or professional place as a basic setting or context for the product.

Characters in the commercials were classified as well. Overall, 63% contained child characters along with adults or animals, and 29% had child characters only. By sex, males outnumbered females about three to one. And when only females were depicted, they were usually children (14 of 16) whereas only

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about one-half of male only depictions were children (24 of 49).

Sex roles were closely adhered to in the commercials. Females were associated with dolls and males with boats, planes, racing cars, and bicycle noise-makers.

As to the race of the characters, only one commercial had a black-only character (Willie Mays in a cereal commercial) and two had Indians only. In contrast, nearly two-thirds contained white-only characters, and about one-third or those with more than one character were "integrated." Integration often meant having a black or oriental child included in a group (although they were not counted separately).

Several commercial practices were investigated--such as endorsements, premium offers, use of qualifiers, and so forth. Although requiring some judgement, one question related to whether the commercial was designed especially to appeal to children or whether it might be just as appropriate for a general audience (for example, on an evening news program). About 41% were judged to be appropriate to a general audience. Because of the proximity to Father's Day, some adult product commercials were pitched toward the child (eg., "Buy Old Spice for Father's Day.")

Endorsements and host or character "tie-in's" did not occur frequently in our sample. Four endorsements by celebrities and six host tie-in's were noted.

One complaint has been made that advertisers appeal to children to pressure their parents into buying things for them. This message may be implicit in many of the commercials, but doesn't seem to occur directly very often. We did find one such

direct inducement in a "Spokies" (bicycle attachment) ad. Described as "the coolest thing to put on your bike. . .safe by day, bright by night," the commercial finished with the remark, "Tell your mom; maybe she'll pay for them."

Since animation, almost by nature, uses stereotyped figures and somewhat "deceptive" visuals, no attempt was made to judge whether these were misleading or not. Of the non-animated announcements, however, several fairly obvious examples of camera angles, close-up photography, etc., were found which could well be misleading to the viewer. Examples were the [redacted] "Dawn" and "Barby" doll commercials, Hasbro's "Wacky Wheel" ad, Marx's "Big Wheel"tricycle commercial, and a toy premium used by Pillsbury in its "Funny Face" drink commercial. We were admittedly and purposely cautious and conservative in making judgements about visual deception. Nevertheless, 19 of the 76 non-animated commercials (25%) did use what were called "special visual devices" in presenting their products.

Qualifying phrases which can be useful in some commercial messages, such as the classic: "Batteries Not Included," were also noted. These qualifiers may be either visual or verbal. Almost 20% of the messages did add some qualification to the primary sales message. The usual pattern is illustrated by the doll commercials, in which during the last few seconds on off-stage voice says: "Dolls and other costumes are sold separately," or the cereal premium offers which say "free in specially-marked packages." They are frequently quite brief. One "batteries not included"visual appeared for less than three seconds at the bottom of the screen. It was large enough to read, however.

In only 10 cases could we find any indication of the cost of the product. Again, this is a liberal estimate, since four were Wyler's soft drink mix commercials which stated (in song) "only 3 cents a glass." We were not sure how many glasses could be made or how large the glass might be.

Premium offers were most frequently used by cereal companies. In most cases, premiums were offered as "free," contingent upon buying the product, of course. Overall, 13% or all ads utliized premium offers; for cereals, 28% offered premiums. These were usually some sort of small toy, including "Hot Wheels" cars, a "Johnny Lightning" car, a racing helmet, a "Dawn" doll, and a magic kit. In most cases when there was a premium offer, that offer superceded most information about the product. In other words, the ad was for the premium, not the product.

Some commercial practices are specific to certain products. In toy commercials, "real-life" sounds dubbed in or use of environments not normal to the child or the toy would be examples. These were looked for but no blatant examples were found. Toys did appear to operate better on TV than they probably would in the home with a "normal" inexpert child using them.

Probably as much as what was included in the commercials, the omissions of vital product information was a striking feature of most of them. We tried to keep track or what information was given. Very little. In the report I suggested the following as some important questions which were not answered:

What is it made of?
How big is it?
How does it work?

How fast does it go?
How much does it cost? (Separately? Complete with accessories?)
How much practice does it take to use it?
Is it designed for a certain age group?
How long will it last? (eg., "Will it break if I step on it?")
Where can I buy it?

If one assumes that there is an interest in creating good consumer habits, the child as well as the parent should be asking such questions--and expecting answers.

Other specific aspects of commercials pertained to cereals. Sixteen of 36 (44%) made nutritional claims; more than half mentioned the "sweetness" of their product. Ads for candies and sweets made nutritional claims less often (4 of 21), but usually depicted a child or adult enjoying the product (17 of 21). We didn't expect to find any qualifications or warnings about the effects of too much candy on one's teeth, skin, or general nutrition. And we didn't.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on one's view) only two medicine/drug/vitamin commercials were broadcast, so generalizations about their appeals to taste or other claims cannot be made.

Thematic analysis disclosed that "fun" is an integral part of the message in many commercials for children ("fun flavors," "fun on a stick," "join in and have some fun," etc."Popularity" was implied, if not stated directly in several commercials. In a "Barby" doll ad, for example, the audio begins. . ."when you're popular, it's easy to make friends." Barby is popular and has many friends (all sold separately, of course).

For boys, "speed, noise, and power" are frequent themes. The names of toys are indicative of this (Zommer Boomers, Super

Balls, and Big Wheels), as are the slogans ("Go Power"), and verbal descriptions ("make your bike roar," "just listen to them scream," and "speed enough to burn").

These are some of the highlights of the study of Saturday children's TV last summer. They represent a kind of statistical picture of what's going on. A more detailed look at commercial practices is provided in our analysis of Romper Room.

Romper Room

I think most of you are familiar with the program "Romper Room." It is a syndicated format program appearing in many cities and towns across the country as a live program utilizing local talent in the form of a "teacher," who hosts the program. There are usually five or six preschool children invited to the studio setting which is designed to look like a classroom.

The particular Romper Room program we studied was taped from station WEMT-TV in Bangor, Maine, and the tapes furnished me by Action for Children's Television. The tapes covered one week's programs -- 45 minutes a day -- from Monday to Friday, March 8 to March 12, 1971.

As I said, the analysis focussed on commercial practices of the program. The purpose was to answer the following questions:

1. How much of the program time is spent in playing with, displaying, or demonstrating brand-name toys?

2. How much time is devoted to other activities such as reading stories to the children, saying prayers, playing games, and so forth.

3. How much time is devoted to commercial announcements on behalf of sponsors and to promotional announcements for the program?

4. To what extent does the hostess of the program either give commercials herself or introduce or conclude commercials?

5. Since the program name "Romper Room" is also used as a brand-name for Romper Room toys, and since there is also a corporate connection between Romper Room and Hasbro toys, to what extent are such names or products mentioned or advertised on the program in either regular commercial announcements, plugs, or mentions during the course of the program, or showing or playing with them during the course of the program?

The program time was classified into program activities and formal commercial material. Program activities included, in order of percent of time, TOY PLAY, LESSONS, CARTOONS, GAMES, READING, MISCELLANEOUS TALK BY HOSTESS, PRAYER, OPENING AND CLOSING CREDITS, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, and NON-ANIMATED FILM. The commercial material categories were FILMED COMMERCIALS, HOST-GIVEN COMMERCIALS, PROGRAM PROMOS, and COMMERCIAL TIE-IN'S.

Our study showed that for the whole week 36% of the time was devoted to TOY PLAY. This activity was lowest on Monday (14%) and highest on Thursday, when it occupied 57% of the time. Sometimes the toys are identified by name and sometimes not. To qualify for a TOY PLAY segment, the toys had to be recognizable, manufactured, brand-name toys which one would expect to buy in a store. If the hostess and children played with the toys, demonstrated how they worked, or otherwise displayed or talked about them, the time was classified as TOY PLAY.

Several methods were used by the hostess in the TOY PLAY segments. She often described the toys with words like "a very special light toy." She referred to them as "our" toys ("Rhonda has been using our 'Roundabout Building Blocks'"). She urged

children at home to get the toys ("Now, boys and girls at home, we want you to get a punching clown like this. . . "). She also made sure the TV audience could see the toy ("Let's hold it up on the desk so everybody at home can see it."). And she demonstrated how the toys work and any accessories that come with them.

In the TOY PLAY segments, 20 different toys were involved. Fifteen of them were identified as Romper Room or Hasbro toys. The others I wasn't sure of.

Another method by which the program and commercial content is integrated is when the same toys which were played with on one day are advertised on another. On Tuesday, for example, the Hasbro Lite-Brite toy is demonstrated by the hostess and a child. On Wednesday, the hostess gives a one-minute commercial for this toy.

Special appeals to children to get their parents to buy were also made. In a Tuesday TOY PLAY segment, cardboard "Safety-Chief Cars" were passed out and the children ran around in them. These cars were used as a kind of premium offer for a local auto sales dealer in Thursday and Friday commercial announcements. It went something like this:

> ". . . at Moir Auto Sales, mommy and daddy will find those special Dodge, Plymouth, and Chrysler automobiles. . . and now, something special just for you. . . . All you have to do to get your free Safety Chief Car and your free Mr. Do-bee Safety Chief Report Card is to ask mommy or daddy to take you to Moir Auto Sales. . . etc."

Other commercial-program integration is achieved by the hostess-teacher. Six "tie-in's" were noted, five in which the hostess leads into a dairy commercial ("I think I hear a Moo . . . it's our good friend Daisy"), and one following two 30-second Hasbro

toy commercials ("Remember to look for your Romper Room toys. And remember they come to you from Hasbro"). She also gave five of the twenty product commercials herself. These included three one-minute ads for Romper Room - Hasbro toys and two for Moir Auto Sales. In addition, she gave the five promos for the program.

Plugs or mentions of products were also fairly frequent. In addition to those visual and verbal plugs for toys during the TOY PLAY segments mentioned previously, there were verbal and visual mentions in the opening and closing credits and in other segments as well. Each day, in the PRAYER segment, the hostess and children recite the prayer, "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food," followed by her saying, "Now you may have your Tropicana Orange Juice from the Pleasant Hill Dairy."

In summary, then, if we add up all of the commercials, tie-in's, promos, and time spent playing with brand-name toys, we find that 45% of the program for the week was commercially-oriented -- designed to promote its own products.